The major legacies of the post-9/11 period are the ongoing American involvements in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Because Al Qaeda had its headquarters in Afghanistan and was sheltered from pursuit by the United States and others by its Taliban regime, this was a logical place for the United States to send forces in 2001. These forces have been augmented and their mission enlarged, and the Afghanistan War proceeds with no direct end in sight. In 2003, the United States invaded, conquered, and occupied Iraq on grounds justified by 9/11. That involvement is winding down. This chapter examines both conflicts and what they mean for the United States.

In his May 25, 2009, Memorial Day message, President Barack Obama asked the American people to observe a minute of silence. He asked that they remember those Americans who have died in war and pray for a time when war no longer scourges the world. Despite this latter hope, the United States has been, and remains, enmeshed in two wars in the Middle East. The precipitating events for ongoing American involvements in Afghanistan and Iraq can be traced, directly or indirectly, to 9/11 and the reaction to it. In the case of Afghanistan, that lineage is direct: American forces were dispatched to that country in October 2001 specifically to pursue and attempt to capture or kill the leadership of Al Qaeda, which was responsible for the 9/11 attacks. That mission brought the United States into direct conflict with the Islamist Taliban regime of Afghanistan that was providing physical sanctuary for the terrorists. In the process, the United States became embroiled in the anti-Taliban side of a civil war in Afghanistan. Over time, the anti-Al Qaeda and anti-Taliban distinction has blurred to the point that President Obama, in his
June 5, 2009, speech in Cairo identified the mission by saying, “We would gladly bring every single one of our troops home if we could be confident that there were not violent extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan determined to kill as many Americans as they possibly can. But that is not yet the case.” Presumably the term “violent extremists” encompasses both Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

The connection between 9/11 and the Iraq War seemed intimate when the United States invaded in 2003 because the Bush administration argued Iraq was a theater of the global war on terrorism (GWOT). As the war has dragged on and more information and analysis have become available, that connection has become more tenuous and questionable. The Iraq involvement, however, is an intimate part of the post-9/11 environment, and although American combat forces are scheduled to be withdrawn completely in 2010, an American presence in Iraq will remain for the foreseeable future. The U.S. commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq are not over, and it is unlikely either will end completely in the near future. Since legacies are lessons from past, presumably completed events, the ability to extrapolate beyond these conflicts is thus limited.

That having been said, certain predictions seem sufficiently rooted in actual experience to appear reasonably safe (recognizing that hypothesized predictions can prove right or wrong). One reasonably safe projection is that American participation in the Iraq War will start to wind down in the not-so-distant future, even if there is some continuing American presence after U.S. combat participation formally ends. The end will not likely be because of some dramatic turn of events that supporters and critics can agree constitutes “victory” for the United States or for the Iraqis (or at least certainly not all Iraqis). Rather, the ultimate resolution of the Iraq situation will be determined by Iraqis (probably influenced by their regional neighbors) after the Americans leave. Although a resolution is clearly further away in Afghanistan, it will also likely not be decisive in any definitive way (one side surrendering, for instance). This ambiguity of resolution may simply be a characteristic of contemporary asymmetrical warfare.

Supporters of both wars in the United States will likely contest the desirability of these outcomes. A bloody form of conflict resolution in Iraq will likely occur regardless of when the United States decides to end its involvement, and the violence that ensues after that departure will increase American angst over the outcome because of the unavoidable knowledge that most of it probably would not have occurred (if any of it would have) had the United States not intruded itself into Iraq in the first place. While the same criticism of American initial involvement in Afghanistan is unlikely, a similar angst over the protracted nature of involvement is emerging.

A second safe assumption is that Americans will be divided about the outcomes of both wars. If one rules out the likelihood in either case of a clear-cut American “victory” (depending on how that is defined) around which almost all Americans could unite, the American people will likely be divided into three groups regarding the outcomes. Some Americans will support the outcomes because they feel these outcomes either were inevitable or produce what they view as the greater good of removing Americans from harm’s way. Some Americans, most of whom have been
generally supportive of the wars, will decry the outcomes because they do not achieve the American political objectives for going and because the result will entail additional suffering for those whose suffering was one of the reasons for supporting the involvements in the first place. Yet others, who may have been supporters or opponents or even neutral for some time, will simply be relieved the wars are over and will not care a great deal about what happens afterward, a sentiment widely felt in the United States after the fall of Saigon in 1975.

A third reasonably safe prediction is that the postwar assessments of the wars—the “lessons learned,” in military parlance—will be contentious, and in some cases acrimonious and vindictive. Because the Iraq War became intensely unpopular and divisive in a way and to an extent not seen in the United States since the Vietnam War, there will be a “blame game” of recriminations about how and why the United States stumbled into what a growing consensus agrees was a mistaken adventure. The postmortem about Afghanistan is more likely to focus on whether the U.S. effort was a noble but doomed attempt that morphed from a crusade against terrorism into partisan involvement in an ethnic civil war in which the United States had no real stake.

A fourth safe prediction is that the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars will produce a revived debate about the circumstances and means of using American forces in the future. In some ways, this debate will be a revival of discussions begun in the 1990s and suspended by September 11 and the subsequent GWOT—of which, after all, both wars have been described as applications or “theaters.” This debate will likely be reminiscent in tone and thoroughness to a similar retrospective after the American disengagement from Vietnam. Whether the analogy will hold regarding conclusions is, to some extent, unknowable, but both wars have the significant potential to have as profound an impact on American national security as did Vietnam.

With these likely commonalities in mind, the two ongoing conflicts can be viewed individually. Because the initial involvement militarily in Afghanistan in October 2001 precedes the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 by nearly a year and a half, it will be reviewed first, followed by an examination of Iraq. The two analyses will be roughly parallel in structure. Each will begin by examining the process by which the United States initially became involved (“The Road to War”), including the feasibility of the mission. The discussion will then move to errors as the missions unfolded (“What Went Wrong and Why”) and will include some speculation on how each war will end. The concluding section of the chapter will examine some likely political and military legacies of the two wars.

Although the wars share similarities, they are also distinctly different. In retrospect, the Iraq War was rather clearly a “war of choice,” the result of decisions reached before 9/11 that it was desirable to overthrow Saddam Hussein. The result was a choice to go to war, which Obama acknowledged in his Cairo speech, since the Iraqi regime, even if it was an annoyance, represented no real threat to the United States, arguments to the contrary made at the time notwithstanding. Al Qaeda’s physical presence in Afghanistan after 9/11 was different. As Obama put it in Cairo, “We did not go by choice, we went because of necessity.”
nonexistent planning for the postinvasion occupation period (Phase IV), which resulted in actions that made the situation even worse than it needed to be, prolonged the occupation, and made the war’s eventual outcome even more problematic than it would have been had the early stages been handled competently. In Afghanistan, the principal error was—and to some extent still is—the failure to distinguish between the two distinct aspects of the conflict—the campaign against Al Qaeda and the civil war for the control of Afghanistan. A focused effort on the objective that truly activated American interests (Al Qaeda) was allowed to be diffused by increased attention to an aspect of the conflict that does not clearly represent American interests (the Taliban versus the government).

The two conflicts will also likely end differently for the United States. Neither is likely to conclude the way the United States would prefer—a democratic Iraq that is a beacon of moderation and stability and a stable, unified Afghanistan that provides no succor to regionally based violent extremists. The questions are how far each situation will end up diverging from these ideal outcomes, what the regional consequences of this divergence will be, and how Americans will react to and learn from those outcomes.

THE AFGHANISTAN WAR

What has become the American war effort in Afghanistan was the first direct American military response to 9/11. The connection between the two events was clear and unambiguous. The 9/11 attacks were devised and executed by the terrorist group Al Qaeda, whose headquarters and sanctuary were in Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban-controlled government of that country. When the Taliban refused to relinquish the Al Qaeda leadership to the United States, the Bush administration began military action in October 2001, the month after 9/11.

At the beginning, the U.S. effort was highly focused and easily justifiable: the destruction of Al Qaeda by either killing or capturing those who were responsible for 9/11 and who might be planning additional attacks against the United States. Thus, American actions could be justified as defensive and necessary, in addition to providing retribution for the nearly 3,000 killed in New York, Washington, and the Pennsylvania countryside.

The problem would have been simply and painlessly resolved had the Afghan government arrested and turned the terrorists over to the United States as requested, but it did not. The Taliban (the root of which, *talib*, translates roughly as “student”) and Al Qaeda had a long history dating back to the Afghan resistance to the Soviet occupation of the 1980s: many of the Pashtun tribesmen who formed the core of the Taliban had fought alongside foreign fighters (including Usama bin Laden) who formed the core of Al Qaeda. When bin Laden was evicted from Sudan in 1996, he moved to Afghanistan at the invitation of the then new Taliban regime.

The Taliban and Al Qaeda formed a bond that has endured and forms the basis of the most conspicuous contemporary difficulties the United States and its allies
have in trying to extract Al Qaeda from the mountainous regions on both sides of the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. Although Al Qaeda is not universally revered in these regions, Pashtun tribesmen still protect them from—or at least do not expose them to—American attacks for three reasons. First, there is a sense of kinship between many Pashtuns and Al Qaeda dating back to the 1980s resistance to the Soviets. Second, one of the pillars of the Pashtun code of behavior (known as Pashtunwali) is the honoring and protection of guests from outsiders. Third, the Taliban treat harshly any dissident Pashtuns who might violate the sanctuary relationship.

The unwillingness of the Taliban to relinquish Al Qaeda to U.S. control created a problem for the American government, which was under pressure, some of it self-inflicted, to bring the terrorists to justice. That problem was access to the terrorists. In the absence of Afghan cooperation, the only way the United States could pursue Al Qaeda was on its own with armed force. In turn, the determination to do so brought the United States into direct confrontation with the Taliban and into the middle of a civil war between the regime and its opponents, symbolized by an alliance of largely non-Pashtun tribesmen known as the Northern Alliance.

The clear and compelling American objective of dismantling the Al Qaeda terrorist threat thus became entangled with the most recent Afghan civil war (some form of civil unrest being endemic to the country), a conflict in which the United States had shown no interest prior to 9/11 other than expressing disdain for some of the more Byzantine behavior of the Taliban regime toward its own citizens. Pursuing Al Qaeda, however, required overcoming Taliban opposition, and removing the Taliban from power was one way to achieve that goal.

This background is necessary to frame the evolution of American engagement in Afghanistan. Prior to 9/11, American interest in that country was indirect, very limited, and restrained by a lack of obvious U.S. interests in the country. During the 1980s, for instance, the United States supported the mujahidin resistance to the Soviet occupation (a resistance that was the spawning ground of both the Taliban and Al Qaeda). That support had virtually nothing to do with inherent American interests in the country but rather was motivated almost entirely by a desire to deny influence to the Soviet Union as part of the Cold War competition.

The presence of Al Qaeda created a U.S. interest in Afghanistan that had not previously existed and justified American military action in a war of necessity in a country wherein such necessity was otherwise unthinkable. That justifiable action, which was and continues to be unsuccessful in its original intent, enmeshed the United States in a civil war in which it had no previous interests. The slender thread that held the two quite distinct bases for involvement together was opposition to the Taliban, not because the United States has any real interest in who rules Afghanistan but because one faction (the Taliban) makes pursuit of the real objective (Al Qaeda) harder. The actual fighting and killing, however, has gradually come to be directed at the Taliban, and thus the outcome of the civil war, rather than against the primary objective, Al Qaeda. President Obama as much as admitted this merger in his Cairo speech, referring to the enemy in Afghanistan as people who want to kill Americans, a term that can be extended to both groups.
The Road to War: Was the United States Justified?

Although the Taliban–Al Qaeda link complicates matters, an assessment of American involvement in Afghanistan must separate it into its two parts: the destruction of Al Qaeda and the outcome of the struggle for control of Afghanistan. The two aspects are of different importance: destroying Al Qaeda is a direct response to a vital, even survival, interest of the United States, while who rules Afghanistan is of relatively little importance to the United States beyond the question of whether the regime shields Al Qaeda from American attack. Put another way, the United States can live—and has lived—with any Afghan regime that does not protect Al Qaeda; any regime in Kabul that would vow not to protect the terrorists is probably acceptable to the United States. On the other hand, the Taliban provide a much more concrete and identifiable, if asymmetrical, opponent than does Al Qaeda.

The road to war in Afghanistan is entirely straightforward as a response to 9/11. Certainly, the United States had some interests in the country prior to the 9/11 attacks because it was the known Al Qaeda sanctuary and American anti-Taliban covert operations had undoubtedly been carried out in Afghanistan. The American foot was thus at least partly in the Afghan door before 9/11; the terrorist attacks caused that door to be kicked down.

Some confrontation between the two countries had been brewing ever since the Al Qaeda terrorists arrived in Afghanistan and took up residence in training camps originally developed (with some CIA assistance) to train mujahidin to resist the Soviets. These facilities were used to train and dispatch terrorists to carry out a series of missions against American targets (the American embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya, in 1998 and the USS Cole in a Yemeni port in 2000, for instance) and had even resulted in a cruise missile attack against a site thought to be inhabited by bin Laden in 1998. Thus, Afghanistan and Al Qaeda were well on the American radar at the time of 9/11. Doing something decisive about them became the prime national priority after the attacks on the American homeland.

The problem would have been conceptually and physically simple had the Taliban acquiesced in American demands to relinquish the terrorists. In that case, the real objective of American policy would have been realized, the terrorist threat associated with Al Qaeda would have been eliminated, and the United States could have rested secure in knowing that effective retribution had been exacted. Although some might disagree on this point, in all likelihood the United States would also have been willing to leave the Taliban in power as part of any agreement by which the Al Qaeda leadership was turned over to the Americans. That, of course, did not happen for reasons already discussed. At the same time, had the operations undertaken to capture bin Laden and his associates in the Tora Bora mountains along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border to which they fled when the United States initially intervened been successful, the U.S. objective would have been accomplished without the need to remain.

Since neither of those conditions occurred, the United States was left with the question of what to do. To answer the question raised in the section heading, there
is little question whether the United States was fully justified in its original purpose of going after Al Qaeda, and an impressive international coalition lined up in support of American action. For a time, world opinion stood solidly behind the United States and whatever it sought to do in response to the 9/11 attacks. The problem was that once the members of Al Qaeda had eluded the American dragnet and snuck across the border into Pakistan (although their exact location was unknown at the time), there was little direct way to attack the primary opponent, and the war shifted its center of gravity to the competition between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. American interest in the outcome of that conflict, as noted, was indirect. The United States opposed the Taliban regime because of its failure to honor American requests about Al Qaeda, but beyond that, it is not at all clear the United States had any particular interest in aiding the overthrow of the regime and its replacement with an alternative.

That is, however, exactly what happened. American direct military involvement in pushing the Northern Alliance over the top in its military efforts against the Taliban was limited to supplying the insurgents, trying to smooth over differences among the factions, and providing air attacks against Taliban forces (using U.S. and British special forces as spotters to help direct the attacks). At the time, there was no public pronouncement that the primary emphasis on the ground against Al Qaeda had shifted to the Taliban, but that is what occurred. In November 2001, the Taliban was defeated, and in December 2001, a Northern Alliance government headed by Hamid Karzai (who was himself a Pashtun warlord, but one who had opposed the Taliban) came to power. In January 2002, the first contingents of international peacekeepers entered the country, and in May 2002, the United Nations extended the mission of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to December 2002. Among the major purposes of the ISAF, which remains the official sponsor of ongoing efforts (although largely with NATO forces assisting the United States), was to keep the Taliban from returning to power. At the time, it was generally believed that the actions of late 2001 had destroyed the Taliban. In fact, the remnants of the Taliban retreated to remote Pashtun regions of Afghanistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, which are largely controlled by the Pashtuns. This sanctuary allowed the Taliban to regenerate, and they began to return to Afghanistan to renew the competition for control in 2003.

Was the United States justified in its efforts in Afghanistan? The question really has two distinct parts. One is whether the United States was justified in employing armed forces to destroy Al Qaeda. Given the recalcitrance of the Taliban regime in acceding to the U.S. demand to relinquish the perpetrators of 9/11, the answer is overwhelmingly positive and is reflected by the international support the United States received for its efforts. Support for destroying Al Qaeda has been consistent and strong throughout U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan, and the basis of most American support for the ongoing effort is the belief that this remains the principal goal. Opposition that has arisen largely since 2008 has tended to have as its origin a belief either that the mission is unattainable or that the real focus has moved away from the original objective.
The other part of the question is whether the United States is justified in its efforts to maintain an anti-Taliban government in control in Kabul. This question is much more controversial. The positive answer is derived mainly from the conjunction of Al Qaeda and the Taliban and tends to treat the two entities as the same. Thus, the Taliban must be defeated in order to strip away the shield behind which Al Qaeda hides. The negative answer is that the United States has little other interest in who wins a tribally based civil war in a country with no tradition of strong central governance in which the United States effectively finds itself opposing the country’s majority tribal faction (the Pashtun) and which has spread over into and destabilized Pakistan, a country in which the United States does have distinct, strong national interests. Moreover, the ability to accomplish the goal of positively affecting the outcome of the civil war in Afghanistan is open to direct question. The question of justifiability is thus not a simple one to answer.

Was the Mission Feasible?

Unless one believes in the virtue of quixotic quests, it is necessary to ask whether the missions that the United States has set out for itself are attainable. The fact that the United States has been enmeshed in Afghanistan for over eight years with no obviously positive outcome in sight suggests, at a minimum, that the mission is not easily achievable. Unraveling the question of feasibility, however, requires looking both at the two parts of the objective already identified and at the mission from both political and military perspectives.

The Political Objective. Although the U.S. government does not distinguish clearly between political goals for what are in fact its two distinct missions, they must be separated and viewed individually, both because they project different outcomes of the effort and because they are of considerably varying feasibility.

There is a critical link between the two objectives, and that is the Pashtuns. The Pashtuns are, as noted, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan (at one point they were a majority, but migration has left them with a plurality of about 40 percent of the population) and the second largest group in Pakistan. In some quarters, the term Pashtun (or its variations) is considered synonymous with Afghans. Moreover, their tribal lands lap over the Afghanistan–Pakistan border (the so-called Durand line after the nineteenth-century British diplomat who drew it), which the Pashtuns do not honor. “Pashtunistan,” as it is sometimes known, encompasses the rugged, forbidding landscape that protects both the Taliban and their Al Qaeda guests and is territory that has historically been only nominally controlled by governments in Kabul and Islamabad. Moreover, the Taliban are almost exclusively Pashtun, although the majority ofPashtuns do not support them, and it is the Pashtun code of honor behind which Al Qaeda hides. For all these reasons, the Pashtuns hold the key to the accomplishment of either goal—destroying Al Qaeda or preventing a Taliban government in Kabul—that the United States seeks to accomplish.
For the United States to succeed, it must have the support, or at least the lack of opposition, of the Pashtuns, a realization that is occasionally made implicitly. This recognition comes in the form of initiatives to try to split so-called moderate supporters of the Taliban (if such exist) away from the radical Islamist movement. While it is unlikely that actual Taliban can be redirected in any meaningful way, what this may mean is that an attempt can be made to influence non-Taliban Pashtuns into opposition to the Taliban cause. The purpose of such conversion would be to deny the Taliban and Al Qaeda untrammeled domain over the tribal regions, thereby facilitating efforts to pursue either Al Qaeda or the Taliban.

Is such a strategy feasible? Once again, it probably depends on which political objective is being pursued. There has been some survey evidence, for instance, that many Pashtun tribesmen are disaffected with Al Qaeda, both because they are foreigners (the Afghans have always been highly suspicious of outsiders) and because they disapprove of Al Qaeda terrorism. The question then becomes how the United States or the government of Afghanistan makes an appeal to those apparently dissident Pashtuns so that they will cooperate in apprehending Al Qaeda.

The most obvious way to attempt such a conversion would seem to be for the government in Kabul to wrest loyalty from the Taliban to itself. There are, however, at least three difficulties in doing so. One is that the government is associated with Kabul, and there has always been a deep rift between the political elite in Kabul and the countryside (since the majority of Afghans are not urban dwellers, the result has historically been a weak central government), in which most Pashtuns live. Moreover, they view those who, like Karzai, have become urbanized citizens as tainted. Second, the current regime may be headed by a Pashtun (Karzai), but its support base and its military leadership are largely non-Pashtun, including heavy participation by ethnic Tajiks, who are the principal rivals of the Pashtuns. This non-Pashtun character of the current regime adds to the appeal of the Taliban. Alleged Tajik domination of the military is a particular point of contention among Pashtuns. Third, the Afghan government is among the most corrupt in the world, and its world-class venality has alienated it from large parts of the population, a problem Karzai refuses fully to acknowledge or confront. General Stanley McChrystal, American military commander in Afghanistan, acknowledged the need for “good government,” which means legitimate, honest governance, as a condition for U.S. success in his Commander’s Assessment of the war on August 30, 2009 calling for additional U.S. troops.

All of this suggests that a process of converting the Pashtuns (and other Afghans who currently do not support the Karzai regime) is going to be difficult, and it is not at all clear what the United States can do to bring it about. Once again, the problem is formidable if directed at either objective, but it is especially difficult when dealing with the civil war. If the goal is to create a political situation wherein whoever rules Afghanistan does not provide aid and succor to Al Qaeda, however, the barriers are somewhat less formidable than if the goal is assuring a government in the country that is both anti-Taliban and anti-Al Qaeda.

Pursuit of the original goal of eradicating Al Qaeda requires negotiating with whichever faction prevails in the civil war to agree not to provide sanctuary to
Al Qaeda, and this is, at least in principle, a goal that can be discussed with either a Taliban- or a non-Taliban-dominated regime. Clearly, it would be easier to deal with the current regime or with one that succeeds it but that is also anti-Taliban, but such a government likely would supply the willingness but not the ability to aid in eradicating Al Qaeda unless conditions change radically. A Taliban-run or -influenced government, on the other hand, would likely be more difficult to negotiate with because of the war that has been waged against it by the United States and others and because of its relationship with Al Qaeda. Since the sanctuary Al Qaeda enjoys requires the cooperation of Pashtuns, however, a Taliban government would probably be better able to isolate Al Qaeda by withdrawing support for it. There is no present indication the United States has devised an effective way to drive a wedge between the Taliban and Al Qaeda, but the prospect is at least hypothetically possible.

The goal of “winning” the civil war by defeating the Taliban is clearly more desirable but less obtainable. It is more desirable because an Afghanistan in which Taliban influence is removed would almost certainly be more cooperative in the pursuit of Al Qaeda than would any Taliban regime (especially if such a regime could cooperate with the Pakistanis in the effort to destroy Al Qaeda). That result is, however, arguably much less feasible, partly for reasons already discussed. The real key, of course, is finding some way to incorporate the Pashtuns into a much larger role in governing Afghanistan. This, in turn, requires a process of political conversion that the military situation makes very difficult.

The Military Objective. The accomplishment of either political objective, but especially the triumph of the government in the civil war, requires a level of control of the Afghan countryside that the government sorely lacks. Even with considerable ISAF military activity, the government securely controls very little territory outside the Kabul region, and such control is crucial to any effective form of counterinsurgency in the area. Put very simply, it would be foolhardy for Afghans to change allegiance to the government in areas that the government does not control and in which their security from hostile retaliation from the Taliban cannot be assured. The Afghan National Army (ANA) is incapable of providing that security, and although it is a primary goal of the augmented U.S. plan for Afghanistan to increase their capability, no one expects it to achieve that capacity in the near future.

That leaves the United States and its ISAF allies (whose numbers are dwindling as states remove themselves from the conflict) in the possibly impossible position of providing the security shield behind which a policy of political conversion by the Afghan government can proceed. The weakness of the government makes such an effort problematical in the best of circumstances, but it is further compromised by two other dynamics. First, there are simply not enough foreign troops available to secure any large part of a country the size of Afghanistan. The quality of security necessary for citizens to develop enough of a sense of safety to convert requires the virtual constant presence of forces to prevent Taliban disruptive efforts, and the size of forces available is simply inadequate for that task. General Shinseki’s estimate of the 300,000 necessary for the occupation of Iraq may be a benchmark for Afghanistan. Second, it is not clear, as suggested in the last chapter, that this
kind of process of security and conversion can be provided by outsiders, who will always be viewed with some suspicion by some natives of the country. Particularly if the political end result is the defeat of the Taliban in the civil war, it is probably necessary that the instrument of that defeat be Afghan forces.

The American military’s answer to this part of the problem is the rapid expansion of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF, composed of the army and police) to take over the role of securing and holding territory currently being contested by foreign troops. The reasons are twofold. One is that the ultimate reconciliation of the Afghan people and their government can only by accomplished by the Afghans themselves, not by foreign surrogates. The second is the realization that American and other public opinion will not tolerate an indefinite occupation of Afghanistan, meaning the buildup of the ANSF is necessary to allow the Americans and their allies to leave. The linchpin of the viability of this solution is whether a viable ANSF is possible, which remained an open question.

What Went Wrong and Why?

How did the United States get itself into the difficult position in which it finds itself in a conflict with such an apparently righteous beginning? While the war effort has been ongoing for nine years, the answers to that question really go back to the earliest stages of the conflict in terms of what the United States both did and did not do to accomplish its changing objectives in Afghanistan.

The Afghan effort has been most prominently criticized, as in statements made forcibly by candidate Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign, for our “taking our eye off the ball” in Afghanistan by diverting American attention and resources to the mounting effort in Iraq. Although it is not entirely clear that focusing attention on Afghanistan would have yielded a significantly different result than the one that faces the United States, the criticism nonetheless has merit.

The charge of diverted attention has three major bases. The first is that the initial military effort to capture and destroy Al Qaeda suffered from a lack of adequate military resources because military assets that might have been used against the terrorists before they escaped Afghanistan into Pakistan were withheld as part of the buildup for Iraq. The gist of this argument is that, had more American military force been brought to bear in places like the cave networks in the Tora Bora mountains where the terrorists were hiding after October 2001, they might not have slipped through the tightening grasp of symbolically named Operation Anaconda. Since more force was not used and the escape occurred, this criticism can be made and supported; since that extra force was not applied, however, it is counterfactual to argue it would have been decisive. This is a point on which disagreement will always exist.

The second argument is that the United States complicated matters by shifting its objective from capturing Al Qaeda to propping up the Karzai government after the unsuccessful attempt to eradicate Al Qaeda and that the result has been a different, less important, and ultimately less attainable set of objectives for the United States in the country. The evidence used to support the added difficulty and consequences comes at least partially from the third alleged basis of mistakes.
The third allegation is that the United States made matters worse in Afghanistan by essentially reneging on promises to the Karzai government to provide significant economic and other assistance after Karzai came to power that would have allowed him to stabilize the country. In fact, the U.S. government did initially promise a multi-billion-dollar aid package, most of which was never appropriated, meaning that assistance in recovering from the damage created by the effort to overthrow the Taliban in 2001 never entered the Afghan economy. The result was that support for the new regime that might have been created by a growing prosperity, and thus a stake in support for the regime, never materialized. One can, of course, argue that the extremely corrupt nature of Afghan politics is such that even the most generous aid package would have been frittered away or stolen by venal politicians, but the fact remains that the United States did not live up to the rhetorical commitments it made to Afghanistan in late 2001 and 2002. It has also been argued in some quarters that the lack of American aid contributed to the regime’s instability and corruption, since the regime was so poor that it had to turn to nefarious methods simply to survive (there are, for instance, reports of Afghan cabinet ministers who moonlighted driving taxis in Kabul because they did not receive their salaries from the government). The diversion of funding for the war in Iraq is normally blamed for this initial failure, and the growing costs of prosecuting the war in Iraq meant that requests for money to aid the Karzai government have been extremely scarce ever since.

These criticisms of the Afghanistan effort adhere primarily to the goal of influencing the outcome of the ongoing civil war in Afghanistan. One can argue that the United States has acted as if it has no real stake in the outcome of that contest by its treatment of the Karzai government, but the rhetoric and rationale for American presence have operated from the assumption that avoiding a Taliban takeover and suppressing Al Qaeda are necessary partners as objectives. Once again, the validity of that association is premised on the assertion that the United States cannot work out a bargain with a new Taliban regime that would include its cooperation in the campaign against Al Qaeda. The previous experience in 2001 offers evidence for this presumption, but the proposed strategy of trying to convert “moderate” Taliban suggests it is not universally accepted.

The result, of course, is a deepening confusion that becomes more important as American attention and resources move from the winding down of the effort in Iraq into Afghanistan. The United States has already been in Afghanistan longer than it has been in Iraq, although the scope and costs have until now been much more modest. As the focus shifts, questions about what the United States hopes to accomplish in Afghanistan will undoubtedly increase. Is Afghanistan worth it?

**Afghanistan as a War of Necessity**

Public opinion has not until recently turned decisively against the Afghanistan War in the way that it has against the Iraq War. Part of the explanation has to be that the Afghan campaign has been much more muted, in terms of both the amount of American suffering and the level of publicity that the war has attracted. Both of
these factors have changed as Afghanistan has become more of a focal point of U.S. foreign and military policy and the American commitment there have become relatively more prominent. At the same time, however, there is a sense of necessity about the United States being in Afghanistan that evaporated in Iraq with revelations that the original rationales for that war were false.

The linchpin of the basis for American participation in Afghanistan is, of course, the pursuit of terrorists (or, in Obama administration language, violent extremists) represented by Al Qaeda. Bin Laden and his associates have demonstrated that they can pose a very real threat against the United States in a very direct sense, and they could and almost certainly may pose a future threat unless they are effectively countered. Criticisms of the American action have centered on the execution of this mission, not on whether it is necessary for American national security. As such, the continuing future menace of Al Qaeda makes the war in Afghanistan a war of necessity for the United States.

When one separates the war effort into its two constituent parts, however, that claim of necessity is diluted and the situation is once again muddied. The objective of eradicating Al Qaeda is necessary, but it is not crystalline that pursuit of that objective is what American service members are fighting over. Rather, it has been the bulk of the argument here that the real impact of the American effort has been directed against the Taliban in their quest to regain control of Afghanistan, an outcome that in itself may not be necessary to the United States. The connection that can elevate saving the Afghan government to the status of necessity has to be that the absence of doing so will make the necessary goal of defeating Al Qaeda more difficult or impossible. If that is true (and its truth or falsity are debatable), then the mission the United States is actually engaged in can be argued as a deployment of necessity. If, on the other hand, the net effect of that action is simply to try to prop up the current Afghan regime and doing so does not measurably contribute to defeating Al Qaeda, then the actual mission quite possibly qualifies as a war of choice, not necessity.

The evidence for what kind of war is being waged in fact is not clear. The direct combat in which the United States is engaged is in Afghanistan, where the Taliban are actively fighting to overthrow the government but where Al Qaeda presence is rarely asserted (indeed, the American government estimated in late 2009 that as few as 100 Al Qaeda operatives may be active in Afghanistan). The only action directed against Al Qaeda has been in the form of controversial air raids against suspected terrorist hideouts in Pakistan. Because these attacks have been fiercely opposed by Pakistan (on the grounds of intrusion into sovereign territory) and have created enough “collateral damage” in attacked areas (alleged civilian deaths), the Obama administration has been under considerable pressure to suspend them. If these direct attacks are indeed ceased, then the only direct connection between American military action and the goal that creates its necessity is the extrapolation of the defeat of the Taliban to the campaign against Al Qaeda. Whether this connection will continue to be adequate in the public mind will depend, to some degree, on the outcome of the war in Afghanistan.
How Will the Afghanistan War End?

This question cannot, of course, be answered with any certainty as long as fighting continues and the situation remains fluid. During the period between 2003, when the Taliban returned to the country, and 2008, when a change in American leadership signaled a shift in priorities away from Iraq and to Afghanistan, the situation had not been going well from an American vantage point, an argument Obama made repeatedly to bolster his reorientation of policy. The Taliban had gradually been increasing their control over larger parts of Afghanistan—even menacing the approaches to Kabul—and the United States was making little visible progress toward defeating Al Qaeda. Since his election, Obama has both increased American troop strength in Afghanistan and raised it as a priority. In the process, the prospect that the war will spread into Pakistan has also been increased.

Will the new American gambit succeed in producing a favorable outcome in Afghanistan? The new administration has admitted that the campaign will be, in Rumsfeldian terms, a “long slog” that will not end soon, and the outcome is uncertain. Obama, in turn, has faced criticism that is almost certain to continue that the effort is futile and should be terminated, an outcome many of his supporters expected him to implement based on the 2008 campaign.

There are, of course, three possible outcomes, two of which seem unlikely in this particular instance of modern asymmetrical warfare. The two unlikely outcomes are the extremes: a clear and unambiguous military victory or defeat for the United States or its adversaries. A clear-cut defeat of American forces is beyond the capacity of the insurgent forces the United States faces. Insurgent forces lack the wherewithal to administer the kind of decisive defeat that can force the Americans from the field. The best they can hope for is to persevere longer than the Americans—to exceed their cost-tolerance—in which case the United States will simply withdraw, as it did in Vietnam and may be doing in Iraq (see below). At the same time, it is probably equally unlikely that the United States will be able to decisively destroy either the Taliban or Al Qaeda as long as those adversaries adhere to an asymmetrical approach to the war.

The elimination of those possibilities leaves the third option, which is an outcome in between the extremes of defeat or victory for either side. The dynamics of such an outcome can vary considerably, from a virtual defeat of one side or the other in the civil war to the continuation of the contest more or less indefinitely. The history of Afghanistan suggests that the retention of power by the Karzai government or the return to power of the Taliban could be transitory, since the country lacks any real tradition of stable, enduring central rule. If the United States realizes this, then its strategy (implicit in what it is currently doing) may be simply to try to bolster the government to the extent it can through greater preparation of the ANA and then declare it has done what it can and begin withdrawal. This in essence is what the United States did in Vietnam and is doing in Iraq; “Afghanization” may be the only course there as well.

The situation is somewhat more complicated if the United States focuses on its primary objective, the defeat of Al Qaeda. Given the physical nature of the problem,
a resolution of this necessary objective requires the cooperation of both the Afghan and the Pakistan governments and their forces with the United States, since attacking Al Qaeda in one country simply sends them scurrying into the other if there is not joint action. As noted in the last chapter, the Pakistani armed forces are not well configured or predisposed to such cooperation and such a mission, and, as Amplification 12.1 suggests, the expansion may produce worse outcomes than the continued existence of Al Qaeda in the country. In turn, the United States must ask itself which is worse, a continued Al Qaeda threat or a potentially destabilized nuclear Pakistan.

**THE IRAQ WAR**

Prior to 1990, most Americans had barely heard of the Middle Eastern country of Iraq, let alone know who its leader was or what relationship the United States had with that country. Then, in August 1990, Iraq invaded neighboring Kuwait, thereby imperiling the access of the United States and others to the region’s primary commodity, petroleum. Suddenly, the United States took the global leadership in evicting Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein from Kuwait under the banner of Operation Desert Shield/Storm, leading to the brief and highly successful Persian Gulf War of 1990–1991. Equally suddenly, all Americans knew about Iraq and Saddam Hussein.
The Persian Gulf War did not end to the satisfaction of all observers. The coalition formed to reverse Saddam Hussein's aggression fulfilled its United Nations mandate to restore the status quo ante, which meant evicting Iraq from Kuwait and restoring Kuwaiti sovereignty. The Hussein government, however, remained intact and unrepentant, and this fact troubled some observers, including a group who became known as the neoconservatives (or neocons, for short) who had advocated his overthrow for years before his action in Kuwait. In the eyes of some (but not all) observers, the Iraq War of 2003 was born of the decision not to overthrow Hussein in 1991.

The Iraqi situation remained contentious but less than critical between 1991 and the terrorist attacks of 2001. The neoconservatives (e.g., Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, and Douglas Feith), who had argued volubly for going ahead and marching into Baghdad in 1991 and toppling the Iraqi regime, left power with the election of Democrat William J. Clinton in 1992. Iraq never left the public agenda altogether, as the United States, Great Britain, and (for a time) France maintained a “no-fly zone” over much of northern and southern Iraq to keep the Hussein regime from wreaking revenge on Kurdish and Shiite groups that had engaged in a 1991 plot (encouraged informally by the United States) to overthrow the regime. Operation Provide Comfort (renamed Northern Watch) and Southern Watch put the United States at odds with the Iraqi regime, resulting in numerous incidents of the Iraqis attempting to shoot down allied reconnaissance aircraft. In addition, President Clinton authorized a limited bombing campaign against Iraq in 1998 (Operation Desert Fox). Policy toward Iraq was part of the broader regional policy of dual containment, aimed at containing the ambitions of both Iraq and Iran. When George W. Bush was elected the forty-third president of the United States in 2000, Iraq policy was once again on the table, leading to the Iraq War.

The Road to War: Was the United States Justified?

The election of George W. Bush was critical to the road to war in three ways. First, Bush himself had become convinced that Saddam Hussein needed to be overthrown. In December 1997, he had given an interview to a San Antonio newspaper in which he argued that his father had been correct in not taking the Iraqi regime down because the result would have been a “civil war.” By 1999, he had changed his mind, hinting broadly in a December speech at the Ronald Reagan library that he favored “regime change” (the early euphemism for overthrowing Saddam Hussein). As Bush prepared for the 2000 election campaign, Wolfowitz, who would later be christened the “father” of the Iraq War, was one of his closest foreign policy advisors. Even before September 11, war against Iraq was not far from the center of the foreign policy agenda. Haass, for instance, reports that then National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice told him the decision had been made as early as April 2001.

Second, the election of Bush brought the neoconservatives into key policy positions. Supported by figures like Vice President Richard Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, a number of advisors like Wolfowitz found their way back into government in more powerful and influential positions than they had previously
held under Bush’s father. Among their major agenda items were overthrowing Saddam Hussein and replacing his regime with a “model” democracy in Iraq and guaranteeing the security of Israel. The two policies were linked by the belief that the flowering of democracy in Iraq would result in demands in other Middle Eastern countries for democratization, which, in turn, would produce more peaceful regional regimes that would be less hostile to Israel.

The third event, of course, was the terrorist attacks of September 11. Their direct ties to activating plans for attacking Iraq are disputed, and many observers such as Clarke and Woodward maintain that one of the first post–September 11 queries by President Bush was for evidence of Iraqi complicity. The Bush administration denies this assertion, but as Chandrasekaran (among others) maintains, Bush “gave the order to begin planning for the invasion of Iraq just a few months after the September 11, 2001, attacks.” This claim is widely accepted by others (see Gordon and Trainor, Packer, Record, Ricks, and Woodward, for instance) and is obliquely admitted by the commander of the operation, General Tommy Franks, in his autobiography. At a minimum, the September 11 tragedy brought to the fore the possible ties of Iraq to terrorists, although the relationship was likely instrumental (9/11 as an excuse to invade Iraq).

The rising justification for an invasion of Iraq was thus the result of a pastiche of motivations that were gradually tied together. Bush himself had virtually no experience in foreign affairs and no known expertise on the Middle East, but he disliked Saddam Hussein because the latter allegedly authorized an assassination attempt in 1993 against Bush’s father (on a visit to Kuwait) and because Bush had apparently been influenced by advisors who favored the overthrow. As a result, Iraq was included in the “axis of evil” designation (along with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and Iran) in Bush’s January 2002 State of the Union address. The resulting demonization of the regime was completed by allegations of ties between the Iraqis and Al Qaeda (although not Al Qaeda in Iraq, which did not come into existence until 2004). This confluence provided the fuel needed by the neoconservatives to press the case successfully for what they had wanted to do all along—overthrow Saddam Hussein.

Were the invasion, conquest, and occupation of Iraq justified? In other words, should the United States have done what it did? In the debate that has surrounded the prosecution of the war, this question has largely been submerged on the basis that the real problem is what to do now. The imputation is that whether the effort was justifiable in the first place is academic, since the United States is engaged and must figure out how to make the best of the situation.

Whether the United States should have gone into Iraq in the first place is, however, critical in determining what can be learned from the experience. Comparisons with Vietnam are tempting. In retrospect, most observers would agree that American participation in the Vietnam War was unwarranted and that the country would have been better off had it abstained. The basic retrospective argument is that American vital interests were never engaged in Vietnam, and the evidence is that the worst-case outcome, the North Vietnamese uniting of the country, occurred and the United States was not especially affected fundamentally by that outcome.
If anything, all the involvement did was to prolong the war and cause enormous suffering for the Vietnamese and for the Americans, simply delaying an outcome that would have occurred much more rapidly and with much less bloodshed had the United States not intervened. Moreover, the erosive effects on the United States that participation in the eight-year-long war caused would have been avoided. It is hard to argue that the United States would not have been better off if the country had never intervened in Vietnam.

The situation in Iraq, of course, was not the same as that in Vietnam. In Vietnam, there was an ongoing conflict (whether it was an internal civil war or a war between sovereign countries—North and South Vietnam—was disputed) that the United States sought to influence. In Iraq, there was undoubtedly great privation and injustice, but there was no war until the United States started it by invading. That said, the question remains whether the United States should have taken the action it did. Like Vietnam, that is a two-part question that is a matter of perspective. The parts include whether the case for invasion was adequate at the time and whether it appears to have been justifiable in retrospect. People can reasonably disagree, depending on the perspectives from which they come and based on the determination of facts not as clear at the time as they became later.

Vietnam was justified largely in terms of the spread of Communism and specifically the so-called domino effect, which argued that if Vietnam fell to Communism, other neighbors would follow like rows of dominos being toppled. This assessment proved correct but largely irrelevant, since the companion assumption that U.S. interests would be vitally affected by the dominos falling proved false—something not entirely knowable at the time initial decisions were made. The decision to invade Iraq was based officially on arguments already mentioned: Saddam Hussein's purported possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and his intransigence in the face of international inspectors of the country; his alleged ties to terrorism, thus tying the Iraqi regime to the GWOT; and, more nebulously, the desirability of instituting a model democracy in Iraq that would serve as a regional beacon.

Two questions must be raised about these justifications for invading Iraq. First, were they accurate (and should those who made the allegations have known if they were not)? In the acrimony over Iraq, it has been generally established that the Iraqis did not have WMD (none has ever been found) and that there were no ties to Al Qaeda (in fact, the secular Hussein regime opposed the religious terrorism associated with Al Qaeda). One can debate the desirability of democratizing Iraq, although the question of whether this was ever feasible remains contentious. The question of whether those who made the decision did or should have known the truth of their justifications also remains contentious; there were, however, numerous critics in and out of government who denied both the principal reasons were true. Whether there were other, hidden reasons also remains a matter of disagreement, discussed in Amplification 12.2.

The second question is whether these justifications, even if true, constituted sufficient grounds to undertake the actions that were carried out. This question largely pits the traditional realists against the neoconservatives and centers on the question of vital interests. Would the worst possible outcome of the situation in Iraq (possession of
The war in Iraq has fueled speculation about whether the stated objectives of the United States were the actual reasons for the war or whether there were other, more subterranean motivations. Such speculation was stimulated by judgments that the stated objectives did not justify the options chosen, so that there must have been deeper, but not publicly stated, reasons. In Iraq, two alternate objectives have been put forward (and denied by those in decision-making positions): petroleum and Israeli security.

The argument about petroleum is straightforward and is believed by many Iraqis. Proponents of this argument maintain the real underlying motivation of the United States is control of the considerable Iraqi oil reserves through the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime and its replacement with a compliant Iraqi regime that would guarantee the United States secure access to Persian Gulf petroleum at a reasonable price—and thus help to free the United States of its dependence on a fickle ally, Saudi Arabia. As Record puts it, “The creation of an American client state in Iraq would, it was believed, provide a substitute for a U.S.-Saudi security relationship compromised by Saudi promotion of Islamic extremism,” a reference to Saudi Arabia’s reluctance to suppress known anti-American, pro–Al Qaeda supporters. Indeed, a rumor circulated in the Pentagon before Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF, the code name for the invasion) began that planners had initially favored calling the mission Operation Iraqi Liberation before someone pointed out the potentially embarrassing acronym (OIL) the name would create.

The other argument is that the real underlying reason for the invasion was to ensure Israeli security in the region. This argument is consistent with the general neoconservative belief that American and Israeli interests and security in the region are closely intertwined—if not synonymous—and that the requisite for Israeli security is a reduction of animosity toward Israel among the Islamic states of the region. Extrapolating from this premise and adding the democratic peace hypothesis (that democratic states do not attack one another), it then follows that the installation of a model democratic regime in Iraq (which would be envied and emulated by its neighbors) is a necessary and important first step toward securing Israeli security and thus a more tranquil Middle East (which, incidentally, would be more amenable to guaranteeing American access to the region’s petroleum). In addition, Record argues, “a benign Iraq...would redound to the immense strategic benefit of Israel, America’s chief client state in the Middle East and a major focus of neoconservative security strategy.”

WMD, ties to terrorists, possible collaboration with terrorists on WMD) create a situation so intolerable that force was necessary to bring about a tolerable outcome? The answer varied, depending on the perspective from which the analyst comes.

From the neoconservative position, the question was irrelevant: the goal of creating a new Middle East reality was so compelling that traditional concerns based in
vital interests did not apply. Indeed, one administration aide, in response to a question on the subject of the relevance of realism to the situation, allegedly replied, “We make our own realities.” From the other side of the ledger, traditional realists answered the vital interest question negatively, arguing that the policy of dual containment had effectively managed relations with Iraq and that the prospect that Iraq would supply terrorists with WMD that might ultimately be used against the United States was theoretically possible but too remote to justify the strong measures taken. The subsequent revelations that both the WMD and the terrorism arguments were based on false assertions only added to this criticism.

Was the Mission Feasible?

The other major prewar question was whether the objectives the United States laid out for itself in Iraq were attainable. If the Iraq mission was in fact impossible to achieve, was that assessment known or knowable when the decision was made? Answering it requires examination from both a political and a military standpoint, with implicit comparisons to the parallel process in Vietnam.

The Political Objective. Whether the political objective in Iraq was feasible depends on what that objective was. If the purpose was the overthrow and removal from power of Saddam Hussein—which was certainly at least an instrumental goal necessary before others could be attained—or the removal of non-existent Iraqi WMD, then it was clearly attainable, if arguably bogus. But what else did the United States hope to achieve?

The other public explanation for American action was the neoconservative goal of democracy promotion. If one accepts that the real political objective in Iraq was to transform that country into a model democratic, free-enterprise country, then the question of feasibility arises. As virtually anyone who has ever studied Iraq knows, it is an almost totally artificial state—a country with no historical, linguistic, religious, or other reason for being in its present configuration—with enormously deep rifts within the population that virtually guarantee its instability. The familiar divisions within the population (Arabs versus Kurds, Sunnis versus Shiites, for instance) were widely known in an expert community that almost universally regarded Iraq as one of the worst places on Earth in which to try to create a political democracy. Moreover, most of the economy was state-owned, and transforming it into a kind of American-model free-enterprise status (also part of the neoconservative dream) was a daunting physical and legal proposition.

Was this perspective known and available to the Bush administration when it reached the decision to invade Iraq (regardless of exactly when that determination was made)? The answer is yes. More specifically, all of the problems associated with Iraq that later became obvious after the occupation began were known in advance of the invasion, and they were ignored. That is a harsh indictment, but it is one supported overwhelmingly by the evidence. On the eve of the war, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul D. Wolfowitz was so bold as to tell a congressional committee that invading Iraq would be much easier than dealing with Afghanistan because there were no ethnic divisions in
Iraq. As plans for the occupation were being made and implemented, so-called Arabists (people with knowledge and experience in the area) were consciously excluded from the process because their experience allegedly prejudiced them against the goal of democratization (this allegation is confirmed by virtually all the sources listed in the “Selected Bibliography”). To cite an example of this ignorance, Chandrasekaran raises the case of one U.S. official sent to Baghdad as part of the occupation, Thomas Foley, an investment banker and classmate of President Bush at Harvard Business School. Foley’s mission was to privatize the Iraqi economy, which meant expropriating state-owned enterprises and selling them to private investors. Under the Geneva Conventions of War (1899), such expropriations by an occupying power are illegal under international law. When informed of this fact, Foley allegedly replied, “I don’t give a s--- about international law. I made a commitment to the president that I’d privatize Iraq’s businesses.”

There was thus considerable sentiment within the academic and policy-examining communities that an attempt to democratize Iraq faced, at a minimum, an uphill fight. Larry Diamond, who was a pro-democracy scholar and former colleague of Condoleezza Rice at Stanford University and who became a part of the administration’s attempt to institute democracy, provides a particularly detailed account of the problems encountered. Moreover, the president himself had, as noted, correctly predicted that overthrowing Hussein would result in a civil war, an assessment also made by the State Department and concurred in by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), both of which produced detailed assessments of the problems that would be encountered in an occupation (among other things, that the occupation would not long be viewed as a liberation). Indeed, a prewar study in early 2003 by Crane and Terrill of the U.S. Army’s Strategic Studies Institute (an arm of the Army War College) conclusively made the argument in some prescient detail about the problems war on Iraq would create. Yet there was relatively little vocal objection in advance, and there is hardly any evidence that negative assessments were considered within the administration. Why not?

The answer is important. If the stated mission in Iraq was indeed quixotic, then one can argue that it should not have been undertaken in the first place. As the prospects of a democratic outcome faded, the fallback position became that the United States did remove a hated and ruthless dictator and gave the Iraqi people the ability to engage in self-determination. Three questions, however, remain, that must be part of the post-Iraq assessment.

The first and most obvious is whether the stated goal of the mission—democratization of Iraq—was a reasonable goal or a neoconservative pipe dream. Was it possible to attain the objective? If not (and those involved did or should have known it was not), should it have been attempted? Second, was attaining the goal worthy of the use of the military instrument of power? Were American vital interests involved in instituting democracy in Iraq? How is the international environment more or less tolerable for the United States with a democratic or nondemocratic Iraq? Third, was the current result (Iraq in the midst of a tortured transition to self-rule with uncertain results) predictable in advance? Did, in other words, the invasion do more harm than good? And was that outcome knowable in advance? There can
be no definitive answers to these questions until the war is over. Even under the best of circumstances and outcomes, there will be substantial disagreement about whether the political outcomes justified the military effort.

**The Military Objective.** Militarily, Iraq is a tale of two wars, one highly successful and one arguably less so. The successful phase was the *invasion and conquest* of Iraq. With a few minor problems that are predictable in war (see Franks and Gordon and Trainor), this phase of the war went smoothly. Whether the ease of attaining the necessary (but clearly not sufficient) goal of toppling the regime was the result of exquisite planning and execution (the official view) or the lack of an organized resistance by the Iraqis is a question that eventually will have to be answered, but the military has, by and large, been highly self-congratulatory about the operation with little dissent.

The other part of the war, the *occupation*, is another matter. This aspect, known as Phase IV by war planners, has been the subject of withering criticism, on two basic grounds. First, critics (including the preponderance of military professionals) have argued that the size and composition of the occupation force was and continues to be grossly inadequate for the task of occupying, pacifying, and rebuilding the country. The OIF force that invaded the country was around 150,000 strong, despite admonitions from, among others, Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki (named Secretary of Veterans Affairs by Obama) that a force of 250,000–300,000 was needed to conquer and pacify the country. When the invasion’s initial phase was successful with lower numbers, Shinseki (and others like him) were dismissed as alarmists by overly optimistic supporters of Secretary Rumsfeld, who had demanded the smaller-sized force that carried out the mission. Rumsfeld (and Cheney) believed before the war that the Americans would be treated as liberators and that only a small residual American force would remain in Iraq after summer 2003. The need to augment the 130,000 Americans remaining in Iraq in 2007 with a “surge” of additional combat troops to put down the insurgency (and help create the conditions for Iraqification) provides further evidence that, over four years after the invade-and-conquer phase, the numbers were still not adequate for Phase IV occupation and rebuilding. These forces were designated to perform a primarily counterinsurgency role, and while their presence did apparently lead to a lowering of violence, it is not clear their numbers were adequate to perform the kind of counterinsurgency mission described in Chapter 11.

The second criticism of Phase IV has been about the inadequacy of planning and execution for what followed the conquest. The available literature suggests that planning was flawed in at least two ways. One is that it was not considered very important by wartime planners, who simply assumed that things would work out on their own. Rumsfeld’s famous “freedom’s untidy” response to reports of looting in Baghdad is exemplary of this lack of concern. Such planning as occurred went on in Douglas Feith’s Office of Special Plans within the Pentagon, a midlevel part of the Department of Defense bureaucracy, and was heavily influenced by Iraqi exiles like neoconservative favorite Ahmed Chalabi. The expert community was studiously ignored: the State Department because of its negativity toward the prospects of success in Iraq and United Nations experts in postconflict reconstruction and state building because they
were deemed to be “too liberal.” In retrospect, those ignored experts very accurately predicted the problems that would be encountered and that were predictable.

Possibly the most egregious error made in the planning, and a particular chestnut of Vice President Cheney, was the expectation that the Iraqis would treat the Americans as liberators and that they would continue to hold the Americans in that regard even as the occupation continued. This assumption might not have been entirely specious if, as the planners apparently assumed, the occupation was very short. Indeed, there was apparently an initial positive reaction among many Iraqis at being liberated from the Hussein regime; that perception faded as the Americans continued to stay and did not improve living conditions in the country. This point was made by Sir Robert Thompson in describing the 1948 Malay insurgency in his book *Make for the Hills*: “There is no hope for democracy if nothing works. Reliance on a military solution will always fail, particularly when sought by foreign troops.”

There is considerable evidence that the seemingly open-ended American occupation was responsible for creating the conditions that allowed for the formation of and support for Al Qaeda in Iraq (see Chandrasekaran, among others). The present author discussed this dynamic in *Distant Thunder*: “The level of involvement (by outsiders) and the ability to influence the outcome are often inversely related. The more public the intervention and the more obvious the degree to which the regime depends on the assistance, the more resentment is likely to be created in the population. The insurgents’ propaganda will be fueled by that dependence.” If true, this observation is devastating for arguments made in defense of the occupation that the longer the United States stays, the more likely success is.

The other flaw was the execution of the plans—Phase IV was a poor plan poorly executed. This criticism has run through the critical literature on Iraq and has centered not only on the conceptual paucity and lack of preparedness of American officials to oversee Phase IV, but also on the incredible ineptitude and, in some cases, arrogance of those given the jobs of carrying out the occupation and rebuilding of the country.

This criticism has two distinct aspects. One is the sheer paucity of preinvasion planning, which meant occupation administrators (carefully not designated as such) arrived in Iraq with no programs to administer, since details of what happened after the fall of Hussein were simply supposed to work themselves out. Diamond, for instance, went to the country with a missionary zeal about democratizing the country, but was disillusioned by the actual situation. He records starkly the reality he found: “from the moment the war ended, Iraq fell into a deepening quagmire of chaos, criminality, insurgency, and terrorism. . . . Iraq became a black hole of instability.” This “black hole” covered the range of public services from basic security and public services to the reform of the economy and the rebuilding of Iraq’s schools and other parts of the infrastructure. While many of the things that needed doing (for instance, many aspects of the infrastructure) had suffered under Saddam Hussein, Iraqis presumed the Americans would fix them and improve their conditions of life; when this did not occur (or did so with remarkable slowness), the Iraqis became increasingly disillusioned with the Americans, who came to look increasingly like occupiers rather than liberators. This change of perspective, in turn, helped spark and fuel the armed resistance to the Americans by various factions.
The role of the military itself must inevitably be part of any assessment. The professional military had been chastened greatly by the Vietnam experience, in which it had been remarkably compliant in accepting the mistaken political leadership that had impelled the military into a war that many of its leaders knew at the time could not be won, an arguable parallel to Iraq. Dissent was not rewarded in Vietnam. One of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations’ top experts on guerrilla warfare, Roger Hilsman (who had served as an organizer of guerrilla opponents to the Japanese in World War II), served as assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs as the decision to intervene in Vietnam was being made. As he put it at the time, "those of us against escalating the struggle in Vietnam reached exactly the opposite conclusion: that the mistake would not be letting Vietnam go down the drain but for the United States to intervene." His views did not prevail, and he left the government on March 15, 1964, removing an obstacle to implementing what proved to be a disastrous military and political decision.

The military itself was not blameless in Vietnam (see McMaster’s scathing indictment of the military’s acquiescent role in that conflict). It was even less blameless in Iraq because most of the senior leaders who agreed to the decision to invade Iraq were products of the professional military education system that had dissected the Vietnam experience and concluded such a mistake should not be made again. At the middle ranks of the officer corps (majors through colonels), there was opposition based on the application of those lessons to Iraq. At the top of the ranks, however, there was, by and large, silence. Some of that undoubtedly was the result of the experience of General Shinseki, who was publicly ridiculed and quietly forced into retirement after his opposition to the war plans. In Vietnam, the generals said “can do” to a mission they could not successfully complete, and they did not, at a minimum, say “can’t do” in Iraq. Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling, a serving U.S. Army officer, summarizes the “failure of generalship” in Iraq most vividly: “America’s generals have repeated the mistakes of Vietnam in Iraq. First, throughout the 1990s our generals failed to envision the conditions of future conflict and prepare their forces accordingly. Second, America’s generals failed to estimate correctly both the means and the ways necessary to achieve the aims of policy prior to beginning the war in Iraq. Finally, the generals did not provide Congress and the public with an accurate assessment of the conflict in Iraq.”

The decision to invade Iraq was made not only on the basis of questionable premises about whether it was necessary and desirable, but also on the basis of questionable views of the objective (a free and democratic Iraq) and how easily that objective could be attained. If, for instance, the administration had told the American public on the eve of the invasion that the result would be a long (over seven years and counting) and expensive (in treasure and blood) quagmire, would the American people have accepted the idea of the invasion? They did not offer a negative judgment because the basis for one was not forcefully presented to them by figures whose judgment they would have recognized and respected. As in Vietnam, there were dissenters, but they were too few and isolated, and they were pilloried by war supporters for their dissent. Did that process serve the American interest well? If not, what lessons can be taken to assure that the same mistakes are not made again? There
would not, after all, have been an inept administration of the occupation of Iraq had there been no war.

What Went Wrong and Why?
Hardly anyone, even those in an administration that continued to assert that progress was somehow possible and occurring, would argue that the Iraq effort represents any kind of exemplary experience that should be repeated. The Bush administration’s early assertions of a quick, bloodless, and highly successful experience that would cost the American taxpayers essentially nothing (Iraqi oil revenues were supposed to cover most of the costs) seem almost comical in retrospect, but they are not. The projections that led the United States into Iraq were almost systematically wrong, as were the projections of what would happen afterward. Why? One answer is that the United States failed to understand at critical junctures the nature of the conflict, and the other is that the United States failed to understand Iraq as a very different war of choice.

Iraq as a War of Choice
Part of the reason the Iraq War is both confusing and controversial is the disagreement about whether the United States should have or needed to become involved in that country’s affairs with military force. Unlike the American initial entrance into Afghanistan, it is not entirely clear that American vital interests were jeopardized once the WMD and terrorist arguments were discarded.

A democratic Iraq is arguably better than an authoritarian state would be there, but is its promotion necessary for American well-being? Many Americans have concluded that the outcome was not sufficiently important to justify expending American forces, especially to the extent it has been used. Iraq was, in other words, a war of choice, not of necessity.

Wars of choice are always more problematically justifiable than wars of necessity, and this is especially in a democratic society where decision makers are accountable to the electorate and must justify their actions to them. The reason is obvious: war involves the expenditure of lives and treasure, precious commodities not to be expended frivolously. A war that cannot be avoided and must be fought is far easier to rationalize than one where the need is not so pressing.

Members of the Bush administration were aware of this dynamic, although they apparently underestimated its potentially erosive effects. Their underestimation stems from their implicit characterization of the action as a war of necessity through the WMD and terrorism assertions. Had the war been over quickly and painlessly as planners like Rumsfeld presumed, it might have been concluded before the choice/necessity dichotomy was raised. The underestimation was failing to recognize that Iraq would become, once again in Rumsfeld’s term, a “long slog” where the necessity of the war would be questioned.

American public opinion turned against the Iraq war when the majority of the U.S. population concluded it was a war of choice that did not justify the sacrifice being made in its name. A major conundrum of the contemporary period illustrated
by both Afghanistan and Iraq is that the American population will support actions of dubious importance/necessity under two circumstances: if they are either too short or too painless to create controversy. The American rescue of medical students in Grenada in 1983 demonstrates the first acceptable set of circumstances, the longer but less painful U.S. involvements in the Balkans in the 1990s (Bosnia and Kosovo) represent the latter.

Iraq directly violates both criteria: it has been long, indecisive, and painful. In these circumstances, it is not at all surprising that it would become unpopular and difficult to sustain. The conundrum is that Iraq-like situations—potential military involvements where vital interests are not unambiguously engaged and where military involvement is likely to be protracted, painful, and indecisive—are considerably more likely than simple and easily resolvable wars of choice or situations where the United States clearly must use armed force.

**How Will the Iraq War End?**

The answer to this question has two distinct, if interrelated, parts about what Iraq will be like after the war. One part is the causation and timing of American withdrawal from Iraq, and the other is the physical situation on the ground in Iraq when that withdrawal occurs.

The possible outcomes form a continuum, the extremities of which can be safely eliminated as highly improbable. One extreme is a total and unambiguous U.S. “victory,” which means the creation of a stable, model democracy in Iraq that can defeat an insurgency that lacks popular support (which has been transferred to the government) and that unites Iraqis into a pro-American postwar polity. This outcome would be easily as much a victory for the United States as it would be for the Iraqis, since it is unclear what conditions would be acceptable to the Iraqis as a whole to allow this outcome. It is highly improbable because of the deep divisions within Iraq—arguably exacerbated by the Americans—that were present before the war, but suppressed by the Hussein regime, and that form the heart of critical judgments about intervening in the first place. There is also almost certainly not sufficient support for the American-favored outcome in Iraq either.

The second extreme is an abject American loss in Iraq. Proponents of the war argue this is the outcome most likely if the United States withdraws “prematurely” (it is never quite clear when the situation is “mature” enough for withdrawal). Such a scenario would mean the American withdrawal would result in a new dictatorship (the apotheosis of a democracy) that would turn Iraq into a full-blown terrorist-supporting state. This outcome is also unlikely. The imposition of a new autocracy (almost certainly Shiite if it occurs) would be widely opposed regionally and would further ignite Kurdish separatism. A multicommunal authoritarian state that can gradually democratize over time may be the more realistic possibility.

This leaves an outcome somewhere in between, some form of Iraqification, as the remaining candidate. Some form of this strategy is clearly being implemented along lines parallel to the Vietnamization policy. Vietnamization had as its major purpose preparing the South Vietnamese to defend themselves against attempts to
reunify all of Vietnam by force. The operational tools for attempting to accomplish this goal included maximum training and equipping of the South Vietnamese, the provision of military assistance to their operations (the use of U.S. close air support when the North Vietnamese attempted to invade in 1972—the Easter Offensive), and the insulation of South Vietnam from outside intervention by sealing infiltration routes through Cambodia and Laos (efforts that ultimately failed).

The same dynamics have been applied in Iraq since about 2005. They have centered on building Iraqi armed forces and police to defend the country against the various forms of the insurgency, a direct parallel to similar efforts in Vietnam. As in Vietnam, the effort has been partially hamstrung by the inability to recruit and train a force sufficient for the job, if for different reasons (the need to conscript the South Vietnamese force, coercion and violence and ethnic loyalties in Iraq). The result, at some point, will be the same: the declaration that the Iraqis are as prepared as the Americans can make them and that it will be up to them to defend the country, at which point the Americans will withdraw. At the same time, the United States will try to make Iraq as impervious to outside influence as possible. In the Iraqi case, this will be attempted by using diplomacy to try to ensure the absence of outside intervention and by posting American forces “over the horizon” in places from which they could conceivably redeploy into Iraq, such as Kuwait and Kurdish Iraq.

The remaining debate over the terms of American withdrawal from Iraq falls within this middle range of possibilities. If unambiguous victory is unattainable (and always was) and equally unambiguous defeat is too politically unacceptable in the United States to be allowed, then some form of ambiguous withdrawal that leaves the final outcome to the Iraqis themselves and allows Americans to rationalize that “we have done all we could” is the best that can be expected. It is essentially a face-saving device, which is what Vietnamization was. The reluctance to call it Iraqification arises both from the reluctance of Iraq War supporters to admit the parallels with Vietnam and from the recognition that Vietnamization ultimately failed. Iraqification by whatever name may also fail, in which case Americans will be left to bicker about whether it would have succeeded if some other disengagement point (e.g., level of preparedness of the Iraqis) had been chosen. As the United States moves to and especially beyond the 2010 deadline for withdrawing American combat forces, the answers will begin to emerge. As pressure mounts within Iraq for a total withdrawal of U.S. forces, it will become even clearer.

THE LEGACIES OF AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ

Afghanistan and Iraq have been two distinctive experiences forged from the same crucible. Their common heritage is 9/11, but their connections to that event are very different, as have been the political and military legacies of each. The individual and collective impacts of these two wars will, however, influence the way the United States military does its business in the years to come.

For better or worse, Afghanistan and Iraq are thus the foundations on which the military and political leaderships must prepare for the future. Iraq in 1990, and
to an extent in 2003, is the last of the traditional wars, in which the United States is likely to encounter a traditional military opponent. In Zinni’s colorful terms (quoted in Clancy and Zinni), “we managed to go up against the only jerk on the planet who was stupid enough to challenge us to refight World War Two.” Future situations will be much more like what Afghanistan always was and Iraq became (the insurgency). Using the Vietnam War as a base, the present author published a book, *When America Fights*, in 2000 that discussed these same matters; in essence, the lessons and legacies of Afghanistan and Iraq are not that much different. They simply provide another example of what happens when one ignores the legacies of the past. In the Afghanistan and Iraq cases, these lessons are political, military, and related to the structure and uses of future U.S. forces.

**The Political Legacy: Be Careful Where You Intervene**

At the turn of the millennium, the United States was afflicted with the belief that it had unprecedented and ineluctable power in the world, and one heard frequent analogies between the United States and the Roman Empire at its apex. The terrorist attacks of September 11 sent the country reeling temporarily, but it rebounded with a fierce determination to right that wrong. The might of the United States could be applied to “make reality,” in the neoconservative sense. After an early apparent success (tempered by time) in Afghanistan, Iraq became the next great political battleground. In Iraq, the United States would take its first step toward transforming the Middle East and the world. Afghanistan was largely forgotten, but it did not go away.

American power was, of course, exaggerated in these descriptions, and the failure to bring democracy to Iraq or to stabilize Afghanistan should cause the United States to reassess what it can and cannot do, especially unilaterally or with limited international support, in the world. The decision to go into Iraq reflected the triumph of the idealistic neoconservatives and the temporary defeat of the traditional realists. The neoconservatives were voted out of office in 2008, and in their places, a new generation of people with views closer to those of the traditional realists has arisen, one that will ask different questions about involving the United States in different situations. The outcome in Afghanistan will further temper their concerns.

Although the questions can be arranged in various ways, one possible ordering suggests three basic questions. The first surrounds the feasibility of adopting any particular political objective: Is success possible? Is it likely or unlikely? How can you assess likelihood in advance? The second surrounds the desirability or necessity of involvement: Is a proposed involvement one of necessity (where the failure to act will result in intolerable disadvantage—affect vital interests) or one of choice (where vital outcomes are not engaged)? If vital interests are not involved, should force be considered, or should alternative means be explored and the use of force eliminated or at least shelved? The third, and related, question has to do with the endurance of support for an action if taken: Will the United States remain diligent even if achieving the objective is long and costly?

These three questions are, of course, related to one another. Following an unattainable objective is quixotic, and a negative answer to the question of attainability
should counsel a negative reaction unless the objective is so overwhelmingly important that it must be pursued as a matter of unavoidable principle. An easily achievable goal will not test the vitality or endurance question, since such goals can be achieved with minimum effort and expense. Likewise, the American people are more likely to provide enduring support for an effort that is clearly vital to the country's interests than one that is not.

These kinds of questions will be asked in the future about American military involvement in unstable situations in the world. Most of the situations will be ambiguous and the answers difficult to determine easily. The Afghanistan and Iraq experiences should, however, create skepticism about optimistic assessments that sound anything like the ramp-up to the invasion in 2003. Because these situations will be in places that are foreign and alien to many Americans, expert opinion should have a greater impact on the debate than it did in the past. The more of the basic questions that are answered negatively—or that cannot be convincingly argued positively—the less the likelihood that a positive decision for involvement will be sustainable.

The Military Legacy: What Kind of Foe to Prepare For

It was a virtual mantra before the Iraq War that asymmetrical warfare was the wave of the future, and that warfare fought by unconventional means represented the kind of military exigency with which the United States would most likely have to deal. Although the American military leaders accepted this vision publicly, it was not a style of warfare that they liked or one with which they could identify. The Persian Gulf War, fought under the leadership of Zinni's last "jerk" to take on the United States conventionally, provided a respite from the new reality, and by and large, the invasion and conquest phase of the Iraq War of 2003 was fought in a modified version of World War II–style maneuver warfare, seemingly providing evidence for not abandoning the "old" ways of war. Operation Iraqi Freedom was used to vindicate two continuing illusions about the application of military force. Military traditionalists saw it as proof of the applicability of the conventional application of force, even if many of them chafed at the size of the force, especially for the postmilitary phase (Phase IV) of the action. Supporters of Donald Rumsfeld's concept of a smaller, more technologically oriented force that could move more quickly and lethally than the old force believed the rapid movement of forces through Iraq vindicated his vision of the future as well. The campaign to overthrow the Taliban in 2001 showed the vitality of both special operations and traditional aerial bombardment.

The various forms of the Iraq insurgency and the long slog in Afghanistan have brought that illusion to an end. Even as American forces moved through Iraq, they encountered—much to their surprise—isolated pockets of resistance, such as individual fighters or groups engaged in ambushes and harassing actions against them. The disbanding of the Iraqi Army and police provided a virtual trove of potential recruits for the various insurgent groups—armed, angry, unemployed men who could blame their conditions on the occupiers. That all major sides—the Kurds and their pesh merga ("those who face death") and the Sunni and Shiite militias, augmented by Al Qaeda in Iraq foreigners after 2004—emerged to form a multisided
resistance that the Bush administration refused to designate a civil war should not have come as a surprise. Similarly, no antidote has been found to Taliban and Al Qaeda activity in the tribal regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Despite thirty years of studying the dynamics of insurgency and counterinsurgency (culminating in the publication of Field Manual 3-24 on counterinsurgency in 2007, among whose lead authors was General David Petraeus), the United States has not found a successful way to quell the violence after over five years of trying.

Both wars either began as or became asymmetrical. Two points of note should be mentioned about that dynamic. The first is that asymmetrical warfare against the American effort in each case has been sufficiently successful that it will almost certainly be adopted by future opponents of the United States. The insurgencies have not defeated the Americans on the battlefield, but they have held at bay the American military goliath. Depending on the final nature of American withdrawal from each country, some of its proponents will almost certainly claim they have prevailed over the Americans. At any rate, the lesson will almost certainly be that asymmetrical warfare is the way to combat the United States, and as a result, that is the kind of opponent the United States should anticipate and attempt to overcome in the future.

The other point is how the insurgents in both countries have learned to adapt their method to maximize its effectiveness. Iraq offers the clearest example. Earlier forms of asymmetrical warfare, such as Vietnam, were fought in rural settings, generally in the tropical green belt that surrounds the Earth’s Equator. In Iraq, most of the fighting has been in the setting of urban guerrilla warfare, and the asymmetrical opponents have adapted classical insurgent techniques like ambush to the new setting. In Iraq, two innovations have stood out. The most prominent, of course, has been the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), essentially booby traps to destroy Americans riding in what have turned out to be inadequately armored vehicles, and this tactic has been enhanced by lying in wait with antiaircraft missiles to shoot down helicopters trying to reach the scene of IED attacks to ferry out survivors. The other has been the use of suicide bombers against urban targets, a method adopted by the Taliban, especially in Pakistan. Neither technique is entirely novel, but both have confounded the American occupiers. Their legacy is twofold: these kinds of tactics will almost certainly be used the next time the United States faces an asymmetrical opponent, and just as these were novel tactics in the Iraq War, the next opponent will almost certainly have equally ingenious adaptations to present as problems for the Americans.

**Afghanistan, Iraq and the American Military: What Kind of Force**

A consequence of the reaction to Afghanistan and Iraq is that the U.S. military will have to regroup before it faces a future foe. Depending on the outcomes, one political impact is likely to be some reluctance to employ force in the future. While this reluctance to see Americans put in harm’s way will provide a breathing space for this regrouping, it is not clear what happens if, during the period of skepticism about military employments, a real crisis—a war of necessity—is thrust upon the country. Some analysts are concerned about such a possibility in Pakistan, but the Obama
administration seems committed to lowering the military content and raising the diplomatic content of policy there. Events will influence which emphasis succeeds.

At least two elements will play into the equation as the military looks forward. The first has to do with how it physically regenerates itself in the face of the almost certain hemorrhage of many from its ranks and a likely lack of enthusiasm among potential new recruits. The other is conceptual and has to do with how (or whether) the military can make the transition from an almost exclusively heavy, symmetrical structure with some asymmetrical add-ons to a force that balances more enthusiastically and physically a future where asymmetrical threats at least equal symmetrical ones, as Secretary Gates proposes.

**Manpower.** The manpower problem is the more immediate and pressing concern. First, in Iraq and now in Afghanistan, the government has essentially "robbed Peter to pay Paul" in the sense of overextending, overusing, and even arguably abusing the force it has to the breaking point. The litany is familiar: for example, multiple deployments of active-duty and reserve units, arguably without adequate breaks; "stop loss" measures to prevent those whose terms of enlistment have expired from leaving the service; and mistreatment of wounded and other veterans when they return to the United States. These conditions have already made many potential recruits wary of joining, despite Obama's promises to relieve the conditions. Moreover, when the American withdrawal finally occurs and there is inadequate reason to keep military members involuntarily in service, there will almost certainly be a large number of resignations and failures to reenlist. The recruitment “boom” of 2008-2009 (where all services met their quotas) seems temporarily to reverse that trend. Whether enhanced enlistment rates will survive the recovery of the economy is another matter. Historically, military recruitment and prosperity have been inversely related.

The military faced this same problem after Vietnam, and the short-term results are not encouraging for current military planners. The problem was probably worse in Vietnam because the military itself was largely blamed (rightly or wrongly) for the outcome, a verdict that it resented but could not deflect altogether. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the military bears part of the blame but has not been discredited institutionally by the effort in either country. Nonetheless, the experience that American soldiers and sailors have had in these wars will make the task of military recruiters more difficult than it was before the wars.

The size and nature of the future military and its future missions are intimately related. If the United States projects more involvements of the size and nature of Iraq, then it will require a substantially larger force than would be the case if it envisages smaller deployments and missions. Conversely, the size of the military makes possible and impossible different kinds of missions. A clear lesson of Iraq, for instance, is that the current U.S. armed forces are not large enough comfortably to accommodate the military occupation of a middle-sized or larger opponent. One of the lessons discussed in Chapter 10 is that the All-Volunteer Force concept produces a very good but not necessarily a very large force.

The military, of course, does not determine its own size, which is a prerogative of the Congress. What size forces the United States needs after Afghanistan and Iraq
CHAPTER 12  The Unresolved Dilemmas in Afghanistan and Iraq

will be the decision of the political system, which will pass judgments both on the desired size and missions of the military and on the physical and political difficulties of attaining different sizes and qualities of force. In looking at the question, there are five possible ways for the armed forces of the post-Iraq era to “man” themselves.

The first is the status quo: the continuation of the ongoing all-volunteer force recruited in the current manner. This will almost certainly be the approach attempted initially after the current involvements end. The rationale for continuing the present system will be that it worked before in producing the kind of force the country desired and it represents a structure and approach with which the military is familiar and comfortable. Moreover, removing the shadow of Iraq should reduce the reluctance of new recruits to come forward and existing troops to reenlist. The negative side of this argument is that the shadow of Iraq will linger and that potential new members (as well as reenlisting present members) will be reluctant to commit until they see tangible evidence that there will not be another Iraq in their futures.

If the status quo is inadequate, as it arguably will be, the second option is enhanced recruitment. This can take on several guises. It can mean increased incentives for enlistment/reenlistment, such as larger bonuses, college tuition vouchers, and the like. It can also mean reaching out to new constituencies, such as recruiting more females or members from minority groups into the service. Shorter terms of enlistment and guaranteed leave time can also be part of the package, as can amenities like better living conditions for military members (greater access to the Internet and e-mail for deployed troops, for instance). These approaches seek to widen the recruitment/retention base of the armed forces and to keep members satisfied, while not diluting their quality. The problems include the expense of bonuses and incentives and the danger of turning the force into one of more disproportionate minority composition than it already is.

A variant of enhanced recruitment offers a third possibility—lowering standards for recruits. To some extent, this has already been incorporated into attempts to maintain force levels in Iraq, and it can consist of two actions, both of which enlarge the potential pool of military accessions. The first is to lower educational/intellectual standards. By statute, the military can recruit only a very small percentage of troops who lack high school diplomas (the standard measuring stick), and increasing the percentage of nongraduates increases the pool. The problem is that high school dropouts, as a group, are probably less capable and more unreliable than those who graduate, resulting in a less capable force with greater discipline problems. The other method, which is more controversial, is to allow recruitment of people convicted of some categories of crime who are now precluded from service.

If the first three methods are inadequate or unacceptable, a fourth is a return to conscription (the draft). Although it has not been activated or used since the end of 1972, the United States still retains a selective service system that registers eighteen-year-olds and that could be reactivated without specific legislation. The draft system, by which the military obtained most of the force that fought in Vietnam, was a victim of the backlash against that conflict. Since Vietnam, even raising the possibility of a return to involuntary military service creates a political firestorm of opposition that no political actor will seriously advocate (Representative Charles Rangel
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(D–NY) regularly presents an advocacy of the draft but for the symbolic purpose of pointing to inequities and flaws in the current system. Much of the opposition to the draft arises from the inequities of the old system, but many of these have been overcome. Nonetheless, the idea of a draft continues to be problematical, as investigated in the Challenge! box.

**Challenge!**

**THE DRAFT OPTION**

A major reason for opposition to the old selective service system was that it was riddled with inequities that allowed those with money, privilege, or power to evade service but ensnared those lacking such advantages. To some extent, the issue of equity will always plague any conscription system, although those inequities can be minimized.

Inequity has two sources. The first is at the front end of the process and involves who is “eligible” to be drafted. Under the Vietnam-era system, there was an extensive set of exemptions from service, including educational participation (attending college), family concerns (marital status), and even employment in occupations deemed to be vital to national security. Moreover, all women were exempt. This created an economic and educational gap between those who might be chosen to serve and those who would not. This form of inequity can be lessened by removing all sources of exemption (except strictly defined physical or mental disability), thereby also increasing the eligibility pool beyond what used to exist. The problem is that this would mean the children of those with power and wealth would be part of the eligible pool rather than being exempt, making implementation even more difficult to achieve.

The other source of inequity, which cannot be erased, is inequity in terms of who serves. A selective service system is premised on the idea that the military (or any alternative forms of service) does not need or want all of the members of the eligible pool and thus selects some and bypasses others. The result is inequity: some endure the sacrifice of service, and others do not. A major approach to reducing this inequity is to provide rewards (e.g., college expenses) for those who serve but not for those who do not. Because selection and induction into the armed forces potentially involve being placed in harm’s way, the gap cannot be removed altogether.

The military also opposes a conscript force because it entails unwilling, discontented members who create disciplinary and morale problems that dilute force quality. The dilemma, as already pointed out, is that an entirely volunteer force will always be smaller than a conscript force can be, because less people will volunteer than can be compelled to serve. The result is to impose limits on force size and thus uses.

Imagine the situation wherein the AVF concept cannot yield a large enough force to meet the country’s need in some future crisis. Would you favor a draft to produce more service members? More to the point, would you be willing to be drafted? Would you favor removing all sources of inequity—including some from which you might benefit—from the system?
The fifth alternative is largely an artifact of Iraq: the privatization of parts of the force. In Iraq, for instance, Avant reports that Rumsfeld estimated there were 20,000 "private security personnel" in Iraq in 2004, making them "the second largest member of the ‘coalition of the willing.’" The use of these forces, provided by so-called private security contractors (PSCs), has certain advantages, as catalogued by Avant: they can be mobilized quickly to provide flexibility and surge capacity; they often possess special skills, since they are recruited from the open market; they can be recruited internationally; and they are politically less costly than regular soldiers. The disadvantages include cost, especially when they are used in high-risk situations; reliability, since they do not report through normal military chains of command; integration into regular forces; and legal ambiguity (status under the laws of war).

In one sense, privatization of the military is simply an extension of the principle of privatizing government functions generally and has been extended to a number of other military tasks already—food service is an example. On the other hand, the use of these kinds of forces strikes many as a resort to mercenary forces (defenders argue that they are not mercenaries because they only sign up to fight for the United States and are not generally available to the highest bidder, as mercenaries are); moreover, they raise the same kinds of problems of control and responsibility as does an organization like the French Foreign Legion, to which private forces like Blackwater have been analogized. Moreover, scandals surrounded Blackwater Worldwide private security forces (renamed Xe Services LLC in February 2009) in 2007 (see Snow, What After Iraq?). One intriguing question is whether one is more willing to risk these kinds of forces in situations where one would not place citizen-soldiers whose "expenditure" would have greater political consequences.

Manpower and Missions. The impact of Afghanistan and Iraq on military manpower will be to make it more difficult, at least after the effects of the recession recede, to recruit a force that replaces the current force, and especially to create a larger force more adequate for Iraq-sized or larger future missions. For some, this limitation will be viewed as a virtue because it means the United States cannot contemplate another episode like Iraq (this was clearly the case after Vietnam).

The relationship between military mission and manpower requirements will be one of the most important elements of the post-Iraq debate. Barring unforeseen changes of fortune, the exit from Afghanistan and Iraq will tend to reinforce rather than negate the tendency of Americans to eschew military solutions to problems for a time, during which the military services (and especially the Army and Marines) will physically and psychologically attempt to assess the experience and try to recuperate from the harm the war has done to their ranks and their images in the world. If there are no calls for large-scale deployments over the next half decade or so, the combat arms will not complain.

There are likely to be two major lightning rods in the postmortem in the wake of Afghanistan and Iraq. One is how to reassess, and probably scale back, the military's activism, while still keeping a strong commitment to security. The Obama administration in 2009 inherited the problem of international religious terrorism, but Al Qaeda itself will likely remain solidly, if unofficially, domiciled in the mountainous outreaches of
the Pakistan–Afghanistan border region (Waziristan) unless things change. In the short run, the response may well be restricted to aerial raids. The advantage is that such raids do not directly tax the overused Army and Marines, and their violation of Afghan and Pak sovereignty is not as great as if ground troops were used. The disadvantage is that such forms of attack are rarely conclusive and have not successfully targeted bin Laden and his cohorts in the past. The Obama administration is trying to partially demilitarize the effort against terrorism, but it cannot ignore it or the contention by many that the military is an, or the, appropriate instrument for this war.

The manpower problem will be ubiquitous. Will the United States rebuild the Army and Marines back to their pre–Iraq War levels? Or will they be made larger or smaller? The Iraq War so tied down American ground forces that it has been virtually impossible (and fortunately not necessary) to conduct a major deployment elsewhere simultaneously. Is that what Americans want? Conversely, a smaller force—even if technologically augmented to create force multipliers—can presumably be used less than a larger force, which some see as an advantage. A larger force, on the other hand, can be used for purposes that may allow it to guarantee a greater level of security or to get into more mischief, depending on one’s perspective.

**Conclusion: Security After Afghanistan and Iraq**

The Afghanistan and Iraq Wars make planning for and executing policy aimed at furthering national security more difficult than before the wars. Although the military itself is likely to avoid the tarnish of blame for the lack of success in both cases more than was the case for the post-Vietnam military, there will indeed be a postwar hangover that will, at a minimum, make the necessary reconstitution of the armed forces more difficult than it otherwise would be. At the same time, the notion that military force is a multifunctional instrument that can solve a wide range of problems has also been brought into question by the wars. The prime promoters of this multifaceted dimension of military force, the neoconservatives, have largely been discredited by the effort, and their influence has clearly declined.

The Obama administration appears to view the use of force more cautiously than did the Bush administration. Military activism will lie fallow for a time while the military rebuilds itself, both physically and in terms of what it does and how it does it. The increased commitment to Afghanistan is an exception to this tendency. One can only hope it takes advantage of its enforced introspection to provide an outlook more forward looking than the post-Vietnam assessment did.

Although one hates to do so, it is necessary to end the chapter on a somber note. The lesson of Vietnam was “no more Vietnams,” which roughly meant no more involvement in quixotic causes where the realistic prospects of success were minimal. Iraq, unfortunately, met the definition of what was to be avoided, and the United States immersed itself in yet another Vietnam-like lost cause. Afghanistan has arguably evolved in the same direction. One of the lessons of Iraq will likely be “no more Iraqs.” Will the same be true in Afghanistan? And will the United States actually learn the lesson this time? Or will there just be another interval before it forgets and repeats the same errors again?
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STUDY/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The text predicts certain characteristics about the post-Iraq environment. What are they? Will they prove true or false? How do any discrepancies between the predictions and the reality affect the text's assessment of that environment and its predictions about the post-Iraq world?
2. How did the United States become involved in Afghanistan? Was war necessary or a matter of choice? Explain.
3. What does it mean to say there are two wars in Afghanistan? What are they? How does their existence complicate thinking about and acting in that country?
4. What went wrong in Afghanistan? How is the war likely to end?
5. Discuss the road to the Iraq War, starting with the legacy of the Persian Gulf War and moving forward to 2003. Include a discussion of the role of the neoconservatives in your answer.
6. Was the U.S. action in Iraq politically or militarily feasible? Assess the feasibility on both measures.
7. How will the Iraq War end? Assess the possible outcomes and the effects of those outcomes on both Iraq and the United States.
8. What are the broad lessons of the Iraq War? Discuss and assess each lesson.
9. How should the United States decide to man the post-Iraq military? At what levels and for what purposes should it be sized? How should the requisite numbers be obtained?

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Selected Bibliography


